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ABSTRACT

Social network analysis suggests that there may be important interactions between the source of support and the type of support offered. An alternative scoring procedure was designed for the Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ) to examine the relationships betwen social network structure, types of social support, and determinants of support satisfaction. Undergraduates (N=198) responded to questions presenting situations for which people might need support and listed those people whom they could rely on for support, their relationship to those people, and their rating of satisfaction with the support they receive. The SSQ was scored to yield the number of social network members in different relationship categories for each of the support eliciting questions. Subjects' social networks consisted of nuclear family, other family, friends, and others. Satisfaction with support was positively related to the proportion of the network occupied by nuclear family, and negatively related to the proportion of friends in the network. Students did not turn to different network sectors for different types of social support. This investigation found a significant difference in results depending upon method of analysis, suggesting that researchers interested in studying the relationships between social network characteristics, type of social support, and support satisfaction might productively analyze the nature of the specific relationships in each subject's supportive network. (NRB)

Social Support: Interrelationships Between Type, Source, and Satisfaction

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Abstract

In an effort to examine the relationships between social network structure, types of social support, and determinants of support satisfaction, an alternative scoring procedure was designed for the Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ). Within a college student population (N=198), social networks consisted of: nuclear family, other family, friends, and others. Satisfaction with support was positively related to the proportion of the network occupied by nuclear family and negatively related to the proportion of friends in the network. Students did not turn to different network sectors for different types of social support. These findings are discussed from a life-span developmental perspective. Advantages and disadvantages of the alternative scoring system are discussed.

Social Support: Interrelationships Between Type, Source, and Satisfaction

Psychologists and other health care professionals who are interested in the prevention of psychopathology have turned their attention to the stress buffering effects of social support (Gottlieb, 1981, 1983). Social support has been shown to contribute to both psychological adjustment and physical health (Broadhead et al., 1983; DiMatteo & Hays, 1981; Leavy, 1983). While the effects of social support upon health status have been consistent and positive, they have also been quite modest. This may be due, in part, to the failure to distinguish important dimensions of social support (Henderson, 1984). In an effort to address this possibility recent studies have investigated a variety of transactions all subsumed under the general concept of social support (Lin & Dean, 1984).

Social networks are the human aggregates which supply the focal individual with social support. Social network analysis suggests that there may be important interactions between the source of support and the type of support offered. Within special populations, the characteristics of social networks have been related to both the kinds of social support provided and to psychological adjustment (Hirsch, 1980; McLanahan, Wedemeyer, & Adelberg, 1981).

One aspect of this type-by-source interaction is whether "support-specialists" are present in most people's networks. A support-specialist is a person who provides a unique, limited kind

of support to the focal individual. In his critique of the work of Wiesenfeld and Weis (1979), Gottleib (1981) suggested that hairdressers may be support-specialists in the networks of their customers and their specialist status should not be transformed into generalist status by well-meaning health care professionals. The contrasting position is that networks are composed, either primarily or exclusively, of "support-generalists"; "core" network members able to supply an individual with all or many types of support. There is research which indicates such generalists are present in support networks and that they offer effective support in a wide variety of situations (Caplan, 1976; Lowenthal & Haven, 1968; Miller & Ingham, 1976).

The extent to which networks are composed of either generalists or specialists is likely to depend on a number of factors. For example, the composition of an individual's social network may be influenced by their stage of development. A recent study by Nair and Jason (1984) indicated that children who had high density networks dominated by family members were more satisfied with their relationships than children who had low density networks consisting mostly of friends. Interestingly, Hirsch (1979, 1981) has suggested that, for adults, high density networks are less adaptive for coping with stressful events. Certain personality characteristics also are likely to effect social network structure (Henderson, 1984). Gottlieb (1981) suggests that personality variables such as "coping styles, attitudes toward help-seeking, and social skills" (p.228) may well

influence one's ability and willingness to engage and use social networks.

The Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ) developed by Sarason, Levine, Basham, and Sarason (1983) provides one strategy for investigating support in a variety of life situations. In an attempt to make the SSQ more sensitive to variations in social network structure, a revision of the scoring procedures was devised for this study. The SSQ was scored so that it yielded the number of social network members in different relationship categories for each of the support eliciting questions. This made it feasible to study the relationships between social network characteristics and the type of social support solicited within a general population.

We predicted that if the support networks of college students are composed predominantly of generalists, a factor analysis of the data would yield factors organized around the relationship categories. The presence of support-specialists would be revealed by factors in which specific relationship categories clustered with specific SSQ items. Alternatively, type of support might be a more powerful organizing dimension for our subjects than source of support. If this were true, then we predicted that the factors derived from this analysis would consist of SSQ item groupings.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 198 undergraduate students at a large

midwestern university. The sample consisted of 122 females and 76 males. The mean age of the sample was 19.45 years.

Tests and Materials

Social Support Questionnaire (SSQ). (Sarason, Levine, Basham, & Sarason, 1983). Each question on this 27 item scale presents a situation for which people might need support. Subjects are asked to list those people whom they can rely on for support, their relationship to those people, and their rating of satisfaction with the support they receive. Sarason et al. developed two separate social support scores for each subject: (1) average number of network members noted for each question (SSQN) and (2) average satisfaction rating (SSQS).

Procedure

The SSQ was scored in two separate ways. The first method of scoring was identical to that reported by Sarason et al. For the second method of scoring, responses to each question were coded according to the number of people mentioned in each of seven relationship categories (nuclear family, other family, friends, helping professionals, acquaintances, teacher/employer, and other). Examination of the data suggested that the categories of helping professionals, acquaintances, and teacher/employer were infrequently used. These three categories were therefore merged into a global "other" category. The original "other" category was eliminated because it was rarely used and often included unusual responses (e.g., Jack Daniels Whiskey). A factor analysis was performed on the scores yielded by the second scoring method.

Results

A factor analysis of the revised SSQ scores yielded a four-factor solution. These four factors grouped scores according to the relationship of the network member (nuclear family, other family, friends, other), independently of the situation for which support was elicited. These four factors accounted for 10%, 9%, 10%, and 10% of the variance, respectively, and had relatively low correlations with each other (range: -.19 to .16).

As might be predicted, the average number of responses (SSQN) was positively correlated with the four network subgroup scores, with the highest correlations occurring for average nuclear family responses (r=.61, p < .001) and average friend responses (r=.74, p < .001). These data are reported in Table 1. This suggests that although all relationship categories are significantly correlated with the average number of responses, nuclear family and friends account for more responses overall.

Support satisfaction was moderately related (r=.35) to the average number of network members. However, when the different relationship groups are examined separately, the correlations between support satisfaction and size of subgroup varies from r=.35 (nuclear family) to r=.03 (other family). Because each of the four relationship categories accounted for only a proportion of the total supportive network, ratios of each of these categories were derived (e.g., average number of nuclear family responses/average number of total responses). Correlating these new ratio scores with satisfaction scores, we found that the only

significant relationships were between satisfaction scores and the nuclear family ratio (r=.16, p < .05) and the friends ratio (r=-.16, p < .05). This suggests that the ability to rely on one's nuclear family for social support is the primary component affecting college students' overall social support satisfaction.

The calculation of the average number of responses includes support group members who may be listed more than once; therefore, an additional score was derived which allowed the investigators to examine the number of different (or unique) people listed throughout the questionnaire. Correlations between this new score and the four subgroup scores (see Table 1) was highest with the friend category (r = .39, p < .001) suggesting that friendships constitute the bulk of the supportive network.

Discussion

A factor analysis of the SSQ using relationship categories of social network members, rather than mean number of responses, yielded qualitatively different results. Using a mean number of responses scoring procedure, Sarason et al. (1983) report one major factor when analysing the SSQ. Our analysis, using a relationship category scoring system, indicated that there were four independent factors, each accounting for about 10% of the variance. College students did not differentiate network members based on type of support needed. Most network members were seen as "support-generalists" who were available no matter what kind of support was needed. The students seem to have a core group of

people (albeit members of four different relationship categories) who provide support in all types of situations queried by the 27 SSQ items. Because there is some empirical evidence that different support sources provide specialized support functions (e.g., Baranowski et al., 1983; Berkman & Syme, 1979; Granovetter, 1982), our confidence in the support-generalist conclusion of this study is not unqualified.

The importance of support-generalists in this investigation may reflect the developmental stage of our respondents (late adolescence) rather than a generalized finding regarding qualities of social support networks. Analysis of relationship categories indicated that subjects' support satisfaction could be accounted for by either the average number of nuclear family members in the student's support network or the nuclear family ratio. These results confirm our understanding of developmental processes and social relations. Preliminary research on young children has shown the importance of familial social support. For example, Sandler (1980) found that adjustment of elementary school children was enhanced by living with two parents and an older sibling, and Nair and Jason (1984) found that networks predominated by family members were the most satisfying to children. It may be that children's social networks consist mainly of family members who provide support-generalist functions, and the late adolescent/early adult developmental task is to establish a social network comprised, at least in part, of support-specialists from outside the family unit. This seems like a plausible explanation

since there is evidence to suggest that social networks undergo major changes during various parts of the lifespan (Antonucci & Depner, 1982). Until analyses of social networks throughout the entire lifespan are conducted, few firm conclusions regarding the appropriateness or importance of support-specialists and support-generalists can be reached.

Although our sample of college students, like Sarason et al.'s, manifested a high, significant correlation between amount of support and satisfaction scores, analysis of relationship categories indicated that most of the satisfaction could be accounted for by the average number of nuclear family members in the student's support network. This finding received further confirmation when ratios were computed for the four relationship factors and correlated with satisfaction ratings. The nuclear family ratio was the only variable positively correlated with average satisfaction ratings, whereas the friends ratio was the only variable negatively correlated with satisfaction ratings.

In spite of the fact that Sarason et al.'s research suggests that different methods of analyzing supportive networks are highly correlated, our investigation found that there was a significant difference in results depending upon method of analysis. This suggests that researchers interested in studying the relationships between social network characteristics, type of social support, and support satisfaction, might productively analyze the nature of the specific relationships in each subject's supportive network.

In this study the relationship scoring system was chosen as a

convenient theoretical bridge between a solely quantitative analysis and an extremely detailed social support profile analysis. However, the present authors have come to believe that even the amount of specificity provided by a relationship coding system may obscure the specialist dimension. The unique support function provided by a specialist may be overshadowed by a generalist who also serves the same support function. Further, individuals may use specialists in idiosyncratic ways, and all individuals might not use specialists for the same support function.

In order to determine whether social support profiles would yield a different conclusion regarding the presence or the absence of support-specialists, we hand-scored twenty questionnaires. The 27 SSQ items were listed across the top of the page and each unique individual was listed along the left hand margin. We then placed hatch marks in the resulting grid to indicate the various questions for which each supportive individual was listed. The 20 hand-scored profiles indicated that there were obvious support-specialists and support-generalists present in our subjects' networks; however, our coding scheme had blurred the distinctions. In order to highlight this point, we have reproduced two very different subject grids (see Table 2).

Subject A's social network consists mainly of support-specialists. Although this subject has a large social network (29 individuals), each member of the network is mentioned, on average, only 2.7 times. In contrast, Subject B has a truncated,

generalist-dominated social network consisting of only six individuals. However, network members of Subject B are mentioned, on average, 9.0 times. Future research might explore both the personality characteristics and adjustment features of subjects in relation to the types of social support profiles which they exhibit.

Differentiating support-generalists and support- specialists is an important task for researchers interested in developing preventive interventions in the realm of social support. Findings from such research investigations would be helpful to program planners who might be faced with the choice of either improving the support given by generalists already in a client's network, or introducing specialists to aid in specific adjustment tasks. Furthermore, research findings should be able to delineate which types of people and which circumstances would benefit most from the skills of support-specialists or support-generalists. Existing research cannot provide this information.

Data from this investigation suggests that a goal of preventive interventions might be to establish greater numbers of support-generalists for persons lacking social support; however, we have also raised several reasons why additional research into this question is necessary. The idea of the support-specialist has a long theoretical history in the social support literature (cf. Caplan, 1964), but the time has come to lend empirical and substantive grounding to the concept.

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Table 1

Correlations Between SSQN, Total Unique Network Members and Average Number of Nominations for Each Relationship Category

	SSQN	Total Unique
Average Nuclear Family	.61	.18
Average Other Family	.14	.14
Average Friend	.74	.39
Average Other	.42	.15

Table 2

Social Support Profiles

Question

Relationship	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
SUBJECT A																											
mother	/		/	/									/					/		/				/			
father	/		/										/					/		/				/			
sister	/		/										/					/						/			
brother		/	/										/					/						/			
uncle	/																							/			
gr. mother		/																							/		
cousin					/											/											
bro-in-law													/														
aunt																		/									
friend 1	/	/				/			/		/											/					
friend 2	/					/																					
friend 3	/									/															/		
friend 4																					/						
friend 5	/																								/		/
friend 6		/		/														/				/					
friend 7			/																								
friend 8			/																								
friend 9					/				/		/	/		/		/			/		/						
friend 10					/																						
friend 11									/							/											
friend 12									/				/								/						
friend 13												/		/				/									
friend 14												/															
friend 15																/											
friend 16														/													
friend 17											/										/						
friend 18																										/	
h.s. teacher										/		/				/											
h.s. counslr										/																	
SUBJECT B																											
mother	/		/	/					/	/					/	/	/			/		/		/			
father			/				/		/				/	/			/			/				/			
friend 1	/	/	/		/		/	/	/	/	/	/		/	/	/	/	/		/			/	/	/		/
friend 2	/								/	/			/				/	/									
friend 3	/	/		/				/		/	/																
friend 4				/				/		/																	